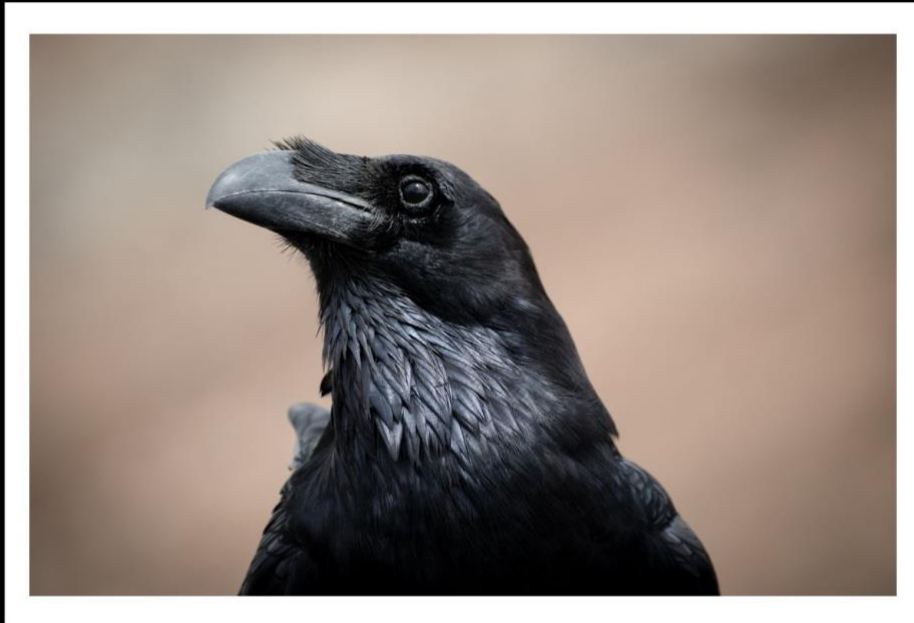


# THE RAVEN REVIEW

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Volume III, Issue IV

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*Adrienne Weiss*

## **The Drive Home**

Inside the car, I pick at a piece of leather sticking out from a hole in the empty seat next to me. The hole had started as a scratch of someone's bored, cracked nail, and over time, years I guess, it had frayed, then come apart. One of us is always pulling or picking at the hole in this seat. Maybe we are trying to see what will eventually be revealed if we keep at it for long enough though I'm not sure what we think we'll find. Loose coin? Old hair elastics? The secret to the universe? Sometimes, I try to imagine a portrait taking shape out of its threads and leather shreds, but nothing ever comes together but an old, ripped-up seat. Our father's always yelling at us to quit poking at it.

As my finger digs into the hole and its foam, I look out the window at the blur of green, the leafy overhang that embodies the broad swath of road. If I concentrate, I can catch quick glimpses of a dark window, imagine the people moving beyond it from one room to another, stepping in beat to the Dire Straits song that crackles through the car's speakers. Now my mother's saying something, and my father's hand is quick to turn down the volume. I lose the beat, keep digging at the hole.

The houses are spread apart, set far from the road. There's not enough time to take in their facades. Behind them, to the south, is the vast expanse of Lake Ontario, and beyond it, the shores of Rochester, New York. I think this lake might be listed in the top twenty of the world's greatest lakes. Someone in my geography class did their midterm presentation on it, and I think that's what they said. I strain my eyes, wait for a gap in the trees for just a slice of lake to flicker at me.

"Just leave it be," my father mutters, as he turns right onto Sumach Street, leaving the lake behind. There's always something to leave be. The volume on the music. The sensitive matters of a daughter. The problem at the bank. The questionable character of a potential son-in-law. I absent-mindedly pull too hard on a thread in the upholstery and have to cough to hide the tearing sound that reverberates like the drum solo in the song now playing. Another thing to leave be. Now I have to convince my mother that nothing's wrong. That no, I don't have a tickle in my throat and stop making something out of nothing.

The air in the car tenses, and I'm impatient for us to just get home, so I can slink into my room, put on my headphones, disappear for a while the way each house disappears in the rear-view as my father turns onto our street, my mother instructing me to take a Tylenol as soon as we walk through the front door because no one can afford to get sick, not now.

This stretch, to our house, is wide open, lacking in trees. Neighbours are strewn about, sitting on deck chairs on their concrete porches or standing at open car passenger doors with their mouths hanging open, sucking in all the oxygen, and one waves now at our passing car. My mother waves back, says something to my father about how surprised she is to see this neighbour

out and about. Hadn't he just had abdominal surgery, not even a week ago? My father's muttering about how the hell should he know.

As we pull into the driveway, the front door to our house opens and out of the darkness comes my older sister in her wedding dress, a huge smile on her bright face. My father switches off the ignition, and the song ends abruptly, leaves me longing for the next note. My mother murmurs to herself as she steps out of the car, then says loud enough for all the neighbours to hear, "Why do you have that on?" But my sister ignores the question, swishing down the porch steps as anyone making an entrance would, pulling the veil from behind her and throwing it out in front of her, a red carpet in greeting.

I slip out of the seatbelt, let it fly back with a snap. I watch, through the back passenger window, as she runs onto the un-mown grass, her hair a mess of curlers. I watch her pull our mother and father onto the grass with her, trying to get them to dance to the sound of no music, crushing the weeds with her bare feet as she does so. My mother protests, pulls away, stays fixed on the walkway. "What are you doing?" she says, "the wedding's not for weeks," but my father just laughs, takes her hand in his and lets her twirl and twirl, the veil circling at her feet like a tidal wave.

The heat in the car becomes unbearable. I scramble over to the other seat, dragging bits of foam and thread with me. When I open the car door, these bits fall like confetti. My mother's now laughing as my father does the twist, his face a grimace of pain and pleasure. Then, my sister turns to look at me. She strikes a pose, pokes at her curlers and pouts her lips. Her eyes sparkle like sunrise on lake water. She winks and beckons me out. It's the perfect portrait. It's the portrait I will seek in my dreams years from now after she's gone, and I've broken into unfixable pieces.

For now, I stand and run to the grass, fall into her open, laughing hand.

*Alexey Deyneko*

## **The Ocean of Twelve Million Lies**

Today is one of those nights  
When the world slides down  
My body  
Like a shy elusive shadow  
Of serpent looking for a prey.

Further and further,

Until I am able to hear  
The echo of voices,  
Bouncing off the ruins  
Of this ancient city,  
Destroyed millennia ago.

Above its decaying remains,  
As black as this night,  
A giant raven spreads his wings,  
Still seeking revenge  
For those lost souls,  
Sacrificed for reasons  
Beyond my comprehension.

Carthage must be destroyed.  
It wasn't their only slogan.  
Just as well  
They asked for patience.  
They stated that all sorts  
Of miracles can happen,

Including through their fault  
Of not arranging things  
In timely manner  
And failure to change  
In times of change.

They took a closer look

At all transactions.  
It's done they said  
And I received a letter  
Of The Imperial Consent.

O Roman Gods!  
Even mere act of writing  
About those nights  
Breaks so much more  
Then pace and simple rhythm  
Of my narration.

I am not afraid of it!  
The ocean of twelve million lies  
Already lies behind me.  
And looking back  
I see eight golden scarabs  
Around the raven's neck.

They gloriously glow.



*Alice Duggan*

## **In the Dining Room on the Third Floor**

The dining room spreads like a cold pasture at the top  
of the afternoon. Somewhere to be, a choice to make

among shrunken choices. As I settle myself two people  
come, wheeling to separate spots on the fence line,

woman and man. I turn my back and call my friend.  
I reassure her also myself: *yes, I'll get better.*

We say goodbye. When I turn around, I see the woman  
crossing wide spaces to the big man who has parked himself

against a wall. He's John Wayne folded in two.  
She speaks to him softly, her hippie-long hair falling

down her back. Takes her jean jacket and wraps him in it.  
She rubs his broad shoulders, his back. Soft words.

He stays immobile, speechless, unhorsed.  
I close my phone. I watch. He speaks a few words

to her, at last.

Does he feel better now? Does she?

*Christian Barragan*  
**Ghost Writer**

I knew the writer was desperate when he managed to trace my supposedly anonymous pieces. In fact, he placed more effort into tracing my stories than into writing his own. Call me Chris, he said. He knew he desperately needed assistance to complete his next project.

Chris introduced himself online and we began meeting at his remarkably unkempt apartment. He could have contacted someone familiar with his work, but he didn't. Not much work to be familiar with, anyway. He told me this was his first time hiring a ghost, but I found that hard to believe. I told him I had worked with several others before, which may have been a lie. He didn't ask further.

Chris wanted to know the results of my work. Critical responses. The resulting fame of writers I helped. Whether anyone ever discovered my involvement. I assured him he would find no one more secretive than myself. Still, it was a lot of fuss over a meager short story.

Chris envisioned a very specific type of story. Something that people would remember him for. Something grounded in the maelstrom of reality to reflect his apparent misery.

His vision struck a particular chord with me, and I wanted nothing more than to see it happen. It also has to sound like me, he said. So, I poured over his existing material, his outlines, his few existing publications, anything I could find.

He quickly started sharing personal details about himself as part of his plan. At his request, I looked into his background, scouring his life for inspiration.

The more I investigated, the more my sympathetic view of him inflated. Chris's works were undeniably boring, and it became clear that he would never make it as a writer or a person. Everyone in his life had long since abandoned him, leaving no potential enemies to prompt a compelling story. No one left to check on him. His depression left him inept and immobile, as what remained of his static figure deteriorated. Despite his initial lack of involvement in the project, Chris aged years in a matter of days. The life drained out of his eyes in a dying progression difficult to witness. He had nothing left to leave his supposed audience.

I told him I knew exactly how to make a memorable story without him ever having to worry about the critical response.

As the days passed, Chris stunted my progress with the insistence of his criteria. He became more impatient. He knew he needed to start submitting something to feel alive again and pushed me to finish before he no longer cared.

One day, he didn't.

You be the judge then, he said. This was the day before I finished the short story.

That morning, Chris was found dead in his apartment. Despite the disfigured mess resulting from the brutal attack, his assailant hadn't left a single trace. No sign of entry or exit, or involvement otherwise. But he couldn't have asked for a different ending. Chris wasn't suited to write his story.

I was.

*David Atwood*

## **Fitting In**

I hear my bones. I hear them growing.  
Joaquin the Spaniard said as he spread  
too long for the beds in Basque, then  
too large for the chaise lounge of France.

Too tall for the doors of Europe  
too colossal for the being he became.  
Too high for a Queen who commanded he bare,  
taller than all who paid for his display.

He grew forever closer to heaven  
But never could grow beyond  
the torture in the bends of his joints,  
or the strain of the stretch of his spine.

Summers grew the Oak trunks broad  
and tall along the Altzo Azpi valley  
until his family tree wanted to see  
if the Giant had outgrown his grave.

When they reached into earth  
and dug up his bones  
for the first time the world found  
Joaquin fit perfectly in the ground.

*D.S. Maolalai*

## **The Photograph**

a man in an upstairs  
and sublet apartment

smoking a cigarette  
a faded grey t-shirt

and perfectly framed  
by the light he has on

and his window  
the bulk of building

and the heavy of night  
looking over its shoulder

full of so many clouds  
and no stars.

*Elke Weiss*

## **May Their Memory Be for a Blessing**

When a loved one is gone, where did the love go?  
It metastasized to grief that seems to feed and grow  
Like a laser once focused, now a million points of light  
My love is shattered but still burns hot and bright  
The shards sharply puncture me straight to the heart  
Jagged memories tear through and rip me apart  
The empty cavities full with regrets and future joys denied  
Grief devours my hopes from the inside  
I look in the mirror and see the cracked wounds of pain  
And I know I'll never be truly whole again

When a loved one is gone, the love continues to flow  
But now it's like acid, and has no place where to go  
I can weep by Babylon's shores for burned temples now ash  
Singing dirges on a world that was gone in a flash  
The river won't cool me, it's salty hot tears  
A murky swamp of pain that never clears  
I can't escape or go back, the past is now barred  
Now I must face a future that feels impossibly hard  
The chains bite my skin, a prisoner of grief's iron hand  
My journey to darkness, without a homeland

When a loved one is gone, where does the love go?  
Sharp fragment and splinters and embers that glow  
Of all the mourners, bent under love's greatest cost  
That all our beloveds someday must be lost  
Each step that we walk, each callous and scar  
Are the road back when we have lost who we are  
Strengthens our resolve, makes our spines steel  
We can be gloriously broken, though we'll never heal  
Like gold-mended pottery, we are beautifully made  
Only enhanced by the cracks that will never fade

My loved one is gone, and I finally know  
The terrible lesson that Death does bestow  
The puzzle of life, the purpose, the plan  
It's not in our ability to truly understand

But bitterness of truth will open your eyes  
That not everyone lives, although everyone dies  
I will carry my grief but live to the fullest extent  
So that others will miss me when my days are spent  
Yes, my loved one is gone, to where I don't know  
But their love nourishes me and I continue to grow

*Harlan Yarbrough*  
**Laram Q'awa**

Ron had climbed Laram Q'awa the previous year with a guide but wanted to make the ascent on his own. The tour company had provided a comfortable camp-bed in a roomy tent along with a delicious breakfast; Ron's solo plans were more spartan. He rented an old Land Rover in Arica for three days and drove it as close to the massif of Laram Q'awa as he safely could. That left him several hundred vertical feet below the tour company's rarely-used base camp and therefore a longer walk on the morrow, but he had expected that and planned for it.

Leaving Arica in the middle of the day got the solo mountaineer to Caquena a little before four o'clock that afternoon and to the limit of the vehicle's capability just after five. He parked the Rover on the most nearly level spot he could find and ate a few handfuls of mixed nuts and a big handful of greens. By the time Ron got his foam rubber mattress spread out behind the front seats of the Land Rover and his old Gerry Himalayan sleeping bag spread out on top of the mattress, dusk had begun darkening into night, so he slid into his bag and dropped quickly into a peaceful sleep.

He woke from an upsetting dream of his ex-wife and her new boyfriend and wanted to go back to sleep to change it but thought checking the time worthwhile. His cellphone told him the hour approached four, meaning he'd slept for eight hours, so he pulled on his clothes after covering a big bowl of muesli with UHT-treated skim milk from a new box. After consuming the muesli and milk, he ate a handful of peanuts, a handful of greens, and a carrot.

Ron remembered the ascent as more of a walk than a climb—that is, it involved a considerable elevation gain but no technical climbing. Even so, remembering a great deal of snowpack and ice on and just below the peak, he put his crampons in his daypack with his first-aid kit, two days' trail rations, and two large water bottles, then lashed his ice axe to the outside of the pack. Wanting to begin walking at first light, he pulled on his Zamberlan hiking boots—and, thinking of the elevation gain ahead of him, wished he had his old and long since discarded but much lighter Fabianos—and laced them up.

Wondering if he could follow the obvious trail to the tour companies' little-used base camp area by starlight and the little sliver of moon, Ron decided to make the attempt. By the time he had pulled on his gloves, shouldered his daypack, and locked the Land Rover, the sky above the eastern horizon revealed an almost antelucan glow. He picked his way carefully and slowly for about twenty minutes but strode normally after little more than half an hour, although the sunrise remained almost an hour away. Bypassing the tour groups' deserted camping area, he picked up the route he walked a year earlier and pressed on.

The last of the *llareta* or *yareta*, which always reminded Ron of the cushion plants he knew from Tasmania two decades before, dropped behind as his path rose above them into a more barren landscape. Climbing steadily and stopping not at all, Ron covered five miles of trail in ninety minutes and gained twelve hundred feet. The next nine hundred feet cost him almost two more hours, at which point he stopped, ate a bigger handful of trail mix than he consumed



while walking, and likewise took a bigger drink, emptying the half-full water bottle lashed to the right side of his daypack. He took a moment to enjoy the view and watched the sparkle of sunlight reflecting from the little Laguna Vitacollo, then set out again somewhat refreshed but breathing hard in the thin air.

Determination and another three hours put the solo mountaineer on the 17,247-foot summit a few minutes after noon, breathless and tired but triumphant. He ate and drank and enjoyed the 360-degree view—but, out of respect for the mountain, walked several feet down from the summit to void his bladder. Sitting on a small piece of closed-cell foam he'd retrieved from his daypack to keep his pants off the snow, he again looked south at the little Laguna and then looked west to the snowy summit of Taapacá.

Ron recalled the dream from which he had awakened that morning, which set him to thinking about Ilse, the ex-wife he still loved with an undiminished intensity but who had moved out of his life almost five years earlier. He woke most mornings to the agony of remembering she was no longer beside him, no longer sharing their lives. After more than four years of grieving too much even to think about another relationship, he had managed to accept a girlfriend into his life in Iquique a few months before his ascent of Laram Q'awa. That she was merely enjoying a fling became apparent in less than a month. The previous week she had announced her departure.

The sting of Isadora's absence from his life did not torture Ron as memories of his ex-wife did, but it hurt and made him feel hopeless about the future. Looking east at the nevados, the snow-capped peaks, of Phaq'u Q'awa, Kuntutiri, and Q'isi Q'isini, he wondered why he bothered to think about a future at all. *Maybe I should just stay right here*, he thought. *It's a beautiful spot, a fine spot to spend the millennia until the sun gobbles up the earth.*

Looking all around, he found the idea appealing. *If I had a satellite 'phone, I could ring Ilse and tell her I'm not coming down—just like Rob Hall did from the top of Everest twenty-five years ago.* The idea made Ron lament not having bought a satellite 'phone. I could've rung Isadora, too, he thought with a heavy heart. *I could even ring the company that rented me the Land Rover and tell them where to find it.* The last thought reminded him he had an obligation, so he stood up, returned his foam seat to his daypack, ate a handful of trail mix, drank a big mouthful of water, slung his pack on his shoulders, tightened the waistband, sighed, and started down the mountain.

*Isabella Lobo*

## **Echoes in the Remains**

Sleep peacefully, little one.  
Lay and look into the awaiting night.  
See in cascading blackness the grinning, wide-eyed stares  
hoping in the darkness you'll find them there.  
Waiting for your breath to catch,  
your throat to ache with little fears.

Lay and see the faces come closer,  
watch them fill the windows, the picture frames, the walls.  
Grinning, godless faces in the rooms,  
coming, marching through the halls.  
Listen for the door hinge creek,  
the grasp upon the handle.  
Hear in the hollow heartbeat of nearing footfalls,  
the hammer,  
the coffin's nail.

Let the ache grow  
Until your cry echoes soundlessly within the eaves.  
Within the days, the nights, the minutes and the hours.  
Tiptoe among the toys, scattered, broken among the glass.  
Step carefully among the scenes,  
torn and shattered,  
Foot by foot through the echoes in the remains  
rotting,  
unheard in the walls.

*Ivan de Monbrison*

**My Dear...**

*Translated from Russian*

Blood flows down my throat.  
The throat is yellow, but blood is green.  
Silence was painted in red,  
on Wednesday,  
on the wall of my room,  
and painted back in black,  
on Saturday.  
I always sleep with open eyes.  
I count with my fingers.  
There is in my house,  
seven men, eight are dead,  
nine women, ten corpses.  
One more step on the glass floor  
and I will fall through it.  
My fall will rip away everything around me.  
This past Monday, then Tuesday too,  
two are dead already.  
The house is on fire... Daddy...  
and I am already dead, too.

*Jeff Burt*

**On this Morning in May**

In the abandoned orchard where we'd played,  
after the storm of cancer broke him,  
lightning threatened but no thunder called.  
I threw a stone to wound the sky, a feral hurl  
of arc and drop. Leaves fell and leaves falling  
were songs of anger my hand had sung.  
Wind rose as anger fell,  
drawn in my chest like rain by the field.  
I closed my eyes and breath I held.  
Pulse beat double, blood in a rapids  
formed by sorrow's riprap, heart a kettledrum  
and the death of my friend a pair of quickened sticks.  
Rain did not fall, and yet,  
when I opened my eyes, wet was the orchard.  
I yearned to yield to the wide vernal air,  
yearned to sit in the apple trees  
in bloom, the happy folios of greening hills  
alive with excess, but I had not come to stay.  
I left the orchard on this morning in May  
and left behind the life which was  
and began over as someone new,  
eyes peering, heart beating,  
rivers running for two. Death had not divided,  
but joined. So, I walked in the rain  
and pressed the palm wounded by stone,  
then, to remember, twice.

*Joseph A. Farina*

**Aphelion**

new realities bore the senses,  
at our aphelion we lose  
all consciousness of time, blurring  
days into a soft haze, supported  
by too much sour wine before  
the appointed hour.  
the wisdom we had hoped for  
exists only in the activities  
of the active mind.  
we still greet the distancing sun  
earlier and earlier  
dreading the sunsets  
when they are done,  
weeping at their beauty  
that calls you to your sterile bed  
the only shelter of your fears,  
were you dissolve your petty needs  
in the solace of crumpled sheets,  
which understand and accept.

*Kevin Knight*

## **Glasses Raised High**

Let's raise our glasses  
as we toast to trauma.  
You test me daily,  
but I fight you.  
I hear you back there,  
don't you worry your sweet little head.  
Deep in the crevice of my mind.  
I think you love me,  
that's why you hug my thoughts  
and refuse to loosen your grip on my reality.  
Its ok though,  
I love you too.  
You make me stronger.  
Don't mind the crying,  
it's part of the process.  
I promise I'm ok,  
and that it's working.  
The process that is,  
not your perseverance.  
Though I do admire your determination.  
Anyways,  
cheers to our good times.  
I'm glad you could make it.  
Tonight, and every other night  
you keep me company.  
But feel free to leave anytime.  
Trust me,  
no one's forcing you to stay.  
¡Salud!

*Lisa Spencer Trecoast*

**Sad**

She smiles as she greets people in the streets  
She shines with her friends whenever they meet

They say she's a source of light and flare  
They see the sparkle that once was there

The truth lies in what she doesn't say  
Her heart's sealed tight to protect its ache

It's a stranger she sees through the eyes of others  
While the real her stays hidden tucked under cover

A dark quiet room is where she wants to be  
Alone with her ghosts only she can see

It's easier to pretend than try to explain  
Why bother anyway  
It hurts to be happy

She'd rather stay sad.

*Matthew Berg*

**Outside of Trouble**

Speaking and I hear them,  
rousing the tired soul,  
one I've known a while,  
ideas that call out,  
call and I listen.

Outside of trouble I pick up,  
take notice of their conversations,  
begin to give attention again,  
dance for joy at their long awaited arrival,  
stop to get all they'd speak,  
these welcome company I've missed.

Out of trouble I walk,  
enter into their presence,  
leave my usual writing:  
therapy in words,  
begin to dream again,  
with every new line I write.



*Michael Vines*

## **Eye of the Serpent**

A generous grant awarded to the British Museum for further exploration into the Temple of Kukulcan, Structure 5B18, is when I decided to kill the plagiarist swine for pilfering my latest codex on Mayan Sacrificial Rituals. The two of us were earmarked as archaeologists investigating the Classic Period of Mayan culture when I formulated my plan. I knew from previous research that the Mayans utilized such strict ceremonial standards for sacrifices that they could be deemed civilized by our own societal standards. I chose to hand weave my own peaked headdress to adorn my sacrifice with feathered plumes of every color I could find. A water-based paint of cobalt blue, a Mayan ritual standard, would be applied to his naked torso while shackled, bound and gagged. The liberation of an obsidian bone blade amongst the museum's vast collection of Mayan sacrificial implements would surely go unnoticed, and would complete, along with numerous texts and notebooks, my travel ensemble.

Our flight from Heathrow to Mexico City went uneventful, and I felt no apprehension allowing my subject the full perusal of my unpublished codex on Mayan fertility rites, knowing he would not be accompanying me back to the Museum. His disappearance into the immense Yucatan Forest, an ever changing, growing and transforming biological entity, would be most regrettable. The Yucatan consumes everything. We changed planes in Mexico City for Guatemala, then a chartered flight took us to Yucatan where an autocarril met us at the landing strip. We traversed miles of banana trees during our journey until we reached a charming hotel with Mayan guest cottages. We made this our operating base and enjoyed a fine dinner before retiring. I stepped outside and gazed at Chichen Itza, which loomed a ghostly white out of a moon lit sky. I was quivering with anticipation about what the next day would behold.

Professor Adams had at least a dozen years to my 45, so I was genuinely concerned when he made the ascent of Chichen Itza's 90 steps (on four sides,) then the remaining five steps of the temple, (our calendar.) I prayed nothing would come about the Professor while we scaled the pyramid, which would be his last.

“May I help you, Professor?” I asked, offering an arm.

“I'm fine, my dear Quimby,” he said, panting.

The pyramid steps were made at a 45-degree angle, and a medical issue at this time would be most inconvenient.

As we were nearing the fiftieth step, Professor Adams stopped to catch his breath, panting hard with his hands on his waist. I was also feeling fatigued from the climb as I lugged about the leather service pouch which was slung across my back.

“I would be happy to pull you along by hand if you'd prefer, my friend,” I asked.

He shook his head and trudged along, hands pushing against his thighs with every step up.

Professor Adams bent down to retrieve what appeared to be a loose stone artifact about the size of a fist.

“This should be properly remounted by our excavation team,” he said, placing it into the pocket of his field coat and marking its location with a metal tag, “they have all the proper tools and compounds to affix it back into its original location.”

I nodded in agreement.

“We're almost there, Professor,” I exclaimed. “The trip down will be much less challenging,” I assured him.

At the top of the pyramid, I reached down and pulled-up Professor Adams by hand. When I turned my back to him, a bright light of excruciating pain erupted across my mind, and my body collapsed in pure exhaustion.

When I regained consciousness I felt shackles about my feet, and my arms were bound behind me as I lay on a cold, convex stone, which projected my chest upward. I couldn't speak because of a gag but my eyes wandered down sufficiently to make out my naked blue painted torso. I could also feel the tightened headdress about my forehead. My own hand made headdress! To my horror, I realized I was about to become Professor Adams sacrifice! May God Help Me!

“Ah, my dear Quimby, I was afraid I hit you too hard with the stone, but you appear fine now. I have to confess my great envy of your work,” he said, “when you showed me your unpublished codex on the plane, I thought it was a brilliant piece of work. It was then I knew I just had to have it!”

“While you were indisposed in the plane's lavatory,” he continued, “I had a quick peek inside your service pouch. My, what an impressive plan you made. The perfect sacrifice, I should say! But I'm afraid, my dear Quimby, the sacrifice will be you!”

“Please don't feel your death will go for naught,” Professor Adams explained, “your sacrifice will go to that great serpent God itself, Kukulcan!”

Professor Adams removed the obsidian bone blade from Quimby's service pouch and held it just below his ribcage.

“To quote you, Professor,” he said, “Classic Period Mayan sacrifices were simple and direct—slicing across the diaphragm below the ribcage and cutting the heart free.”

A guttural scream echoed across the Temple of the Warriors complex, and the still beating heart cast its God nourishing blood over the great serpent effigy.

*Scott Pedersen*

## **Simpatico**

Tippy the dachshund, tail wagging and belly sagging, approached the precipice one tiny step at a time. After peering down over the edge of the bluff, he looked back with the quizzical expression only a dachshund can do so well: the single raised brow ridge, the lowered snout, the slight lateral tilt of the head. Margie, his owner, crouched, used her outstretched hands to coax him away from danger, and scooped him up. Cyn, watching from a safe distance, resumed breathing.

Derrick, the organizer of this “team building” outing, muttered something congratulatory and resumed admiring the view. The beauty of the conservancy was lost on Cyn, who could think only of the unfair performance reviews Derrick had given her the last two years. “Lacks initiative”? *Give me a break. I’ll show you initiative.*

Having seen enough from High Point Outlook, the others headed back into the woods while Cyn, in a boho-chic dress and black boots, remained behind Derrick. When the last person in the group disappeared, she took four bold steps forward and pushed him square in the back. Over the edge he went, no doubt too surprised to yell. She inched forward and craned to see where he landed. He was motionless on a large rock, blood pooling around his head. Satisfied he was dead, Cyn hurried to catch up with the others.

As they strolled along, Cyn imagined what would happen. There were about twenty of them, so it was unlikely anyone would notice Derrick missing until they reached the parking lot, 200 yards down the trail. With the passage of that much time and considering all the conversation that would ensue, there was little chance anyone would remember exactly where she had been. Plus, she was so petite; after Derrick’s body was discovered, Cyn would be the last person of the group suspected. And that’s not to mention it was clearly an accidental slip and fall—much more likely than murder. Once they reached the parking lot, the three employees Derrick had driven in his car would figure out he wasn’t around and send someone back for him.

In fact, Bruce seemed annoyed as he tugged on a door handle of Derrick’s ’74 Volvo. “I’m starving. Carl, go back and get him. You’re a runner, right?”

“That’s not a good reason,” said Carl. “How is that even a reason?”

“Well, *somebody* has to get him.”

“Get who?” All heads swiveled as Derrick reached into his pocket pulled out his car keys.

Cyn regularly imagined things she wished could be true. It was part of her embroidered view of her workplace—and life in general.

At the café where the “team” gathered for lunch, Cyn sat across from Arthur, another hapless handler of computer punch cards. “How’s the liver?” she asked.

“Good,” he said, before stuffing another piece into his mouth, probably to avoid further discussion.

Arthur had small dark eyes buoyed by generous cheeks. His cherubic face so attracted attention that few noticed his thick, black, impossibly shiny curls. Cyn did notice and tried not to

stare. The physical attraction alone, though, was not enough of a catalyst for an amatory pursuit. Maybe someday he would say something charming. Or do something to spark her interest further.

She didn't have to wait long. Two days later, on her usual foray to the mail room during break time, she saw him in the business office—pilfering. He glanced around while reaching into the coffee can where the petty cash was kept. Petty cash—the “floor sweepings” of currency, funded by loose change, the return of purchased items, various unknown sources. She could understand his targeting it. She stood in the doorway in a state of near rapture. *Arthur, you devil.*

Then he looked in her direction and froze.

She walked up close to him as he trembled slightly, his eyes locked on the can. “Arthur, you go ahead. I'm all for it. I'll stand watch by the door. If I see somebody, I'll cough.” When she was halfway to the door, she looked back and said, “Leave about half of it. And fluff it up.” He gave her a questioning look and mouthed, “Fluff?” She nodded and took her position in the doorway.

She didn't understand why he was taking the time to count it. *Are you new at this, Arthur?* When he finished and put the can back, she waved and headed for the mail room.

The next day, Cyn, wearing her favorite boho-chic dress and black boots, stood behind Arthur at the data center window, waiting to drop off punch cards for processing. *What is he plotting today? Maybe he'd like to have a co-conspirator.* Her thoughts were interrupted by the familiar sound of dozens of shuffling feet and hushed talking. The two moved against the wall to make way for another pack of visitors touring the research facility. Cyn stepped closer to Arthur as they passed. Then, with her arm already pressed against his, she impulsively took Arthur's hand in hers and held it tightly until the crowd was gone.

Arthur gave Cyn a quick, uneasy look and handed his cards to the attendant. Cyn hurried to hand over hers and catch up with him. “Wanna take our break outside? It's warmer today.”

“Okay.”

The two sat at a table in the outdoor courtyard, facing each other. Cyn studied Arthur's blank expression and flashed an encouraging smile. “Um, about what happened inside—you seem kind of shy, so I thought I would make the first move.” Trying her best to soften her naturally scratchy voice, she asked, “You didn't mind, did you?”

Arthur shook his head. “I liked it.”

Cyn rocked in her chair, a habit of hers when feeling confident. “You know, Arthur, we've worked together a long time, but we've never had a real conversation. I see you in the hallway and think, ‘There goes Arthur with another load of punch cards. He has really great hair.’ That's it. Maybe if we got to know each other—”

“I was thinking about you, too.”

“Really? That's nice. It's not like I'm swimming in friends.” She laughed. “I don't even know why I'm working here. I have an art degree. If I could just figure it all out—like you.”

“Me? I'm just trying to pay the rent.”

“Anyway, when I saw you with the petty cash yesterday, I realized, we are so simpatico!”

“How so?”

“We can take only so much abuse before we strike back. Wouldn’t it be great if we could do performance reviews of Derrick? Give him a taste of his own medicine.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. The way he finds excuses every year to write a bad review. He picks out one little mistake and blows it up. Uh, why are you shaking your head?”

“I get good reviews.”

*You are such a liar, Arthur.* “Whatever. I just wish I had the guts to strike back for real—like you. Stealing that petty cash—that was righteous.”

“Stealing! I was just reimbursing myself for office supplies I bought. We needed the stuff and didn’t have time to order it.”

“You waited until everybody was gone. Give me a break.” Cyn looked away.

“Submitting a reimbursement form is a big hassle. It takes forever. I just cut out the red tape.”

“Red tape. Uh-huh.”

Now Arthur’s face was bright red. “You saw me. I didn’t take it all, which is what a thief would do. I saved the university a bundle on labor!”

He seemed so adamant, she started to believe him. Further conversation seemed pointless. “I better go back to work,” she said, getting up.

“Cyn, I don’t know what’s bothering you, but I think you should figure it out and do something about it.”

“Just stuff it, Arthur.”

Despite her rebuff, Cyn knew he was right. She went back inside, paused to steel herself, and climbed the stairs to the second floor. She marched toward Derrick’s office, then stopped short of his door. There, clicking along the tile floor as he waddled, was Tippy, tail wagging.

Margie sometimes brought him to work, even though it wasn’t allowed. Maybe she hoped to get fired. Tippy gave Cyn the same quizzical look he’d had at the bluff’s edge.

Now Cyn was teetering. She looked at Derrick’s door and back at Tippy. “Don’t worry, fella, I got this.”

She stepped into Derrick’s office and plopped onto his visitor’s chair.

“Hi, Cyn,” said Derrick. “What’s up?”

“I’ll tell you what’s up, Derrick. Do you remember the first year I worked here? You gave me a great review. But ever since we broke up, you’ve given me crappy reviews. You know it isn’t right. My performance has been exactly the same the whole time I’ve worked here.”

“You’re right,” said Derrick. “Exactly the same.”

“Then change my last review! It’s only been two weeks. You can do it.”

“I stand by that review. I’m not going to change it.”

“Why not?” She slapped the top of Derrick’s desk. “Come on, do the right thing.”

“Cyn, there’s another possibility you’re not seeing. Think about it.”

*Another possibility?* She remembered how happily she'd signed her first review, on that very desktop. "Oh. So, you were doing me a favor that first year. Now I feel like shit."

"Sorry."

"You know what, Derrick? You suck at team building!"

Cyn found Tippy still in the hallway, his tail no longer wagging. She dropped to her knees and hugged him. "You're just the cutest thing. From now on, I'm going to listen to you."

She lifted Tippy's snout in her palm and kissed it.

"There he is," said Margie as she picked up Tippy. She offered Cyn a tissue. "Want to come to my office and talk about it?"

Cyn wiped her eyes. "Maybe later. Is the personnel office still in the administration building?"

*Tim Babbitt*

## **New Babel**

Oblivious monotony

A stairway built upon piled bodies  
As humanity sullenly climbs the ladder  
Reaching for morose paradise above

Angelic hill of stepping-stone corpses  
Its zenith closer with each self-destructive stride  
This cycle of sacrifice surely has great purpose

Blind desperation

A relentless struggle for self-inflicted needs  
Machinations invented to bestow false value  
The ants writhe in mud of their own making

God looks to New Babel with weary eyes  
The cherubs silently wonder if the Maker is proud  
After all, the ants were made in His image

Systematic vanity

The highest echelon living in steel utopia  
Feeding off the rats that crawl below  
An apparatus of one-sided necessity

The rats are paid in hope and freedom  
Promises provide heat and fill their stomachs  
Their revenue only matters if Zacchaeus get his cut

Manufactured purpose

The gathered mass of a corporate pantheon  
Praising the brazen idols of materialism  
Baptized in free enterprise as the offering plate is passed

The soon sweat away the miracle of youth  
And the rats can finally retire in their broken bodies  
All the while great men die without lifting a finger

Such a glorious framework this is

An agency who's foundation is black with tar  
And who's spirit is nothing if not content

If a disruptive word brushes its holy hem  
The syllables will be like a suicide note  
Final words cast into the fire and forgotten

Thus the ants gaze upon the panorama of New Babel  
While rats gather at its feet in glittering shackles

They watch as Eden is drip-painted in a discharge of plastic  
And can't help but recall the words of their Maker

"It was good."



*Xujia Guan*

## To My Stepmother

To my stepmother,

I love your yellow hair. Your smooth strands drenched in the seething sunlight. The big curls bouncing against your cheek, like leaves leaning against a luscious flower. When we flew across the globe to you, my father dyed his hair. Three days of bleach left his fingertips white like a corpse in water. Washing. Washing. Washing. Until the black was all squeezed from his coarse strands—slipping through his fingers in patches. When he came out of the bathroom, his roots were dead. But he grinned like a new man.

*A start.* He said with his flaming scalp.

I love your smile. A block of white, straight teeth. A set of azure eyes. A drawn-on lip, red and royal. Your eyes are too sweet. Do you know how many people fall deep into their brilliance? The lighthouse from beyond the rocks, an expanse of blue, but also past the blue and deeper into that uncoiling riptide—into the yellow and green underneath.

Oh, you definitely do.

My father wears your red smile on his skin, and his eyes follow yours in their long, black reflections. If bleach can turn burned brown into blue, he would have poured it into his sockets. If bleach could straighten the fumble of his tongue saying your language, he would have gotten drunk on that bottle.

I love your voice—that stretches beyond the house and leads my father to your feet. It tells me pretty aspirations just like it told him. Bigger dreams and larger things that I should strive for. A square hat. A pile of dead foliage green. A large house with a tall white fence. A tiny waist and the smell of morning dew on an emerald lawn. I love listening to you. Before I go to bed and when I walk past the glass giants on the street. When I try and jump for the stars.

But as I am next to my window, I watch the birds as they soar. An eagle cries out, like a beckon or an insult; it is a fragile sky that I reach but can't seem to grasp onto. The clouds always float away between my fingers at last like the smokes in the mirror of your vanity. And the sun revealed behind is bright but glaring.

Do you know how you have changed me? I hope you do. My mother tells me about sacrifice, and you tell me about choice. My mother tells me about responsibility, and you tell me about freedom. She is like the ink feathering out on a piece of parchment—steady and smooth. She keeps me warm and caged in a restricted sanity.

You are the bonfire in July and the loud, twisted, dancing bodies on the beach, by the rocks—moving and crackling. You drive me into the flames. My mother has everything laid out for me like the strokes of a brush and the hard, set lines of characters and rankings. She offers me everything on the ground through a single path—trodden by many and of hardened dirt and stacked stone. You gave me a pair of wax wings and threw me into the sky, like a lopsided bug chasing after the sunset—doomed to fall at any moment. To plummet and shatter.

I hate my mother when she leads me to the unchangeable road, but I hate myself when you leave me choking in the sky—dying so close to the sunshine and among the flight of birds.

No, I hate myself for believing in flying.

But hopefully, you know how you have won. My dad and I ran from my mother, her sacrifices and responsibilities, her cold walls and mundane grounds. We are here with you. And while I still look like her, you have too much of my insides. You have sucked her out of me and bleached me clean. You and your colours splattered all over my eyes, my hands, my mind. Red. Blue. White.

Yellow and Green. The fire is burning, and the birds are flying. I stand in your house and cry in front of all this freedom. Then I stand up and become a canvas for your palette.

*Zach Murphy*

## **Blackout**

My roommate took off right before I lost my job at the pizza place. The only thing he left behind was a note that read, “Moved back home.” If only the unpaid rent were attached to it.

I sit at the wobbly kitchen table, gazing at the floating dust particles that you can only see when the sunlight shines in at the perfect angle. Sometimes, you have to convince yourself that they aren’t old skin.

The air conditioner moans, as if it’s irritated that it has to work so hard. I haven’t left the apartment in four days, for fear that the hellish temperature might melt away my spirit even more. Is a heat wave a heat wave if it doesn’t end? I gulp down the remainder of my orange juice. The pulp sticks to the side of the glass. It always bothers me when that happens.

As I stand up to go put my head into the freezer, the air conditioner suddenly goes on a strike of silence and the refrigerator releases a final gasp. I walk across the room and flip the light switch.

Nothing.

There’s a knock at the door. I peer through the peephole. It’s the lady with the beehive hair from across the hall. I crack the door open.

“Is your power out?” she asks.

“Yes,” I answer.

“It must be the whole building,” she says.

“Maybe the whole city,” I say.

“The food in your fridge will go bad after four hours,” she says.

I’d take that information to heart if I had any food in the refrigerator.

“Thanks,” I say as I close the door.

When the power goes out, it’s amazing how all your habits remind you that you’re nothing without it. The TV isn’t going to turn on and your phone isn’t going to charge.

There’s another knock at the door. It’s the guy from downstairs who exclusively wears jorts. “Do you want a new roommate?” he asks.

“What?”

He nods his head to the left. I glance down the hallway and see a scraggly, black cat with a patch of white fur on its chest. “It was out lying in the sun,” the guy says. “Looked a bit overheated, so I let it inside.”

Before I can say anything, the cat walks through the doorway and rubs against my leg.

“Catch you later,” the guy says.

I fill up a bowl with some cold water and set it on the floor. The cat dashes over and drinks furiously.

*At least water is free, I think to myself. Kind of.*

I head into my dingy bedroom and grab the coin jar off my dresser. “This should be enough to get you some food,” I say.

I step out the apartment door and look back at the cat.  
“I think I’ll call you Blackout.”